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Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba: Stories

LOCATED IN SACRED VALLEY OF THE INCA, PERU

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From Earth to Table: A Taste of the Andes at Hacienda Urubamba

By Alec Jacobson



A short drive and a world away from the bustle of Cusco, Inkaterra's Hacienda Urubamba is a refuge tucked into a quiet corner of Peru's Sacred Valley. The Cordillera Blanca mountain range towers above the lodge, and the train to Machu Picchu is just up the road; but when National Geographic grantee Rebecca Wolff and I arrived, we were looking for some R&R. We had ridden down into the valley that morning—in the back of a truck headed for the weekly Urubamba market—and were delighted to sink into the Hacienda's plush couches, and simply take in the expansive view from the lobby. We ordered tea, and were expecting to be met with a variety of the usual packets to choose from. Instead, steaming mugs of coca mixed with local botanicals arrived, and we knew we were in for a culinary experience during our stay here.

Hacienda Urubamba was rebuilt twice so that each cozy room, private casita, and expansive veranda could fully take advantage of the spectacular surroundings. The lodge aims to pamper its cosmopolitan guests, and a key part of that experience is what they call "earth-to-table" dining. The extensive, manicured grounds create a landscape of natural tranquility, but the plants are not just decorative—acres of land are cultivated using traditional, organic methods to provide produce for the Hacienda's restaurant. And, if you want, they'll gladly put you to work: picking the herbs, fruits, and vegetables that the kitchen will then whip up into a dish just for you.



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Rebecca and I had been working on a project about food in the high Andes and were thrilled to embark on a tour of the Hacienda's farm. After eating our fill of quinoa pancakes, we joined Inkaterra's head chef, Rafael Casin, in the fields. Casin is a native of Peru but trained in Europe; he showed us verdant beds of dill and rosemary, but also shucked colorful local corn; pointed to fields of native potatoes; and led us through patches of quinoa, *kiwicha*, and amaranth like we had seen in traditional Andean farming villages.

In a back corner of the fields, Casin led us to a hut where the Hacienda produces another staple of the Andes: chicha. People in the region consume the indigenous corn beer throughout the day as they work in their fields, and women bring massive vats of the homemade drink to town celebrations. Rebecca and I had shared cups of chicha many times, but at the Hacienda's chicha hut, we learned how to make it: grinding corn and seeing how it is naturally fermented.

Later in the dining room, reclining in deep chairs and drinking some of Inkaterra's house wine, the full culinary experience of the lodge came together. The produce we had seen in the fields came to the table on beautiful plates that married traditional Peruvian flavors and world-class techniques. The trout ceviche was deliciously spicy, bringing together a classic dish from the coast with fish caught from the rivers of the surrounding mountains. I ordered the alpaca steak, and was pleased to find a delicate cut of meat with a rich, gamey flavor. All of the dishes would have fit in at a fine restaurant anywhere in the world, but the magic of Hacienda Urubamba is that the food is distinctly and proudly from right there—sourced from the grounds of Hacienda Urubamba itself, or from the fields and towns around the lodge.

Shaking Piscos in the Sacred Valley

By Sarah Erdman



Alfredo mans the bar at Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba in Peru's Sacred Valley. He is a small man behind a massive copper counter, surrounded by wall-sized windows with towering Andes just beyond. Ask for a pisco sour, and the glory is his. Eggs and bottles fly, shakers flip toward the ceiling, and out pours a foam-topped drink for which he has won awards. If you linger at the bar, Alfredo will show you his real passion: bottles of pisco, a grape-based grain alcohol invented by Spanish colonists, that he has infused with native Andean plants from the lodge's vast organic garden. He brandishes bottle after bottle with a grin. Quinoa! he declares. Sweet potato! Purple corn!

These staples are the essence of the Sacred Valley, where Quechua farmers tend their crops amid Inca ruins, 16th-century Spanish churches, and mountains said to embody the spirits of ancestors. The Urubamba River curves through this valley, eddying and splashing toward Machu Picchu. Tourists seem

to follow its momentum. They touch down in Cusco and hurtle through the Sacred Valley to get to that Inca citadel in the sky. Beyond a token stop at an alpaca farm or a weaving workshop, the Sacred Valley rarely gets more than a passing night's stay.

But if it weren't for Machu Picchu, this place would be what you came to see. Along with enigmatic Inca sites, there are hiking trails to tackle, adobe villages to explore, incandescent green fields backed by snowcaps. At artisan cooperatives, traditionally dressed weavers show how their ancestors made natural dyes, pointing out that the crimson of a certain crushed beetle can also be used as a lipstick that lasts for a thousand kisses.

This is the Sacred Valley Jose and Denise Koechlin set out to celebrate when they built Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba on a slope near the village of Urubamba. Following a vision, not a blueprint, they oriented the lodge to face a breathtaking panorama of mountains. They combined Inca-inspired masonry and Spanish colonial architecture, commissioned locals to weave blankets and other textiles, and planted a 10-acre organic garden filled with curious species like Andean mint, golden berries, and tree tomatoes. You can learn to make *chicha de jora*, or corn beer—a typical drink of the Andes—on site, or follow a guide up the slope behind the lodge at twilight for a lantern-lit hike. And on your return from whatever ruin or trail you find in the Sacred Valley, Alfredo is there to greet you, flinging shakers to the sky as sunset lights up the great wrinkled flanks of the Andes.



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